



IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & WELFARE

JAMES E. RISCH – Governor
RICHARD M. ARMSTRONG – Director

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR
450 West State Street, 10th Floor
P.O. Box 83720
Boise, ID 83720-0036
PHONE 208-334-5500
FAX 208-334-5926

NEWS RELEASE

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Ross Mason
(208) 334-0668

Idaho Health Officials Issue Caution About E Coli in Spinach

Idaho public health officials have joined those in at least eight other states in investigating an outbreak of *E. coli* O157:H7, which has been linked to at least three people across Idaho.

The illnesses have been traced to packaged spinach, although officials so far have been unable to identify whether the contamination is confined to a single brand.

“We have heard of reports of cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 illness in Oregon, Washington, Wisconsin, Utah, New Mexico, Connecticut, Indiana and Michigan, in addition to our Idaho cases” says Dr. Christine Hahn, State Epidemiologist with the Idaho Department of Health & Welfare. “Although we have identified packaged spinach as the probable source, no one has yet been able to pinpoint the brand or the stores from which it was purchased. We’re now trying to pin down the brand,” she says. Although three persons’ illness are being investigated by the state public health laboratory, state health officials are looking at other related illnesses to see if they might be *E. coli*-related. The three Idaho infections occurred in persons living in Ada, Canyon and Twin Falls Counties. All three are recovering.

State public health officials are urging people who develop diarrhea after eating raw spinach to call their doctor or local health district. Those who have bloody diarrhea or are particularly ill should seek medical attention and tell their doctors if they ate uncooked spinach. “Most people who ate the spinach will probably not get sick,” says Dr. Hahn. “If you ate spinach and aren’t ill, there’s no need to call your doctor.”

E. coli O157:H7 is a foodborne infection that also can be passed from person-to-person unless ill persons wash their hands diligently after using the toilet. The infection often causes bloody diarrhea and abdominal cramps, which usually go away in five to 10 days. However, patients in about 5 percent of cases suffer kidney failure. “This is one of the more serious foodborne infections,” says Dr. Hahn.

Public health officials cite these as primary protections against *E. coli O157:H7* infection:

- Thoroughly cook ground beef and hamburger. Keep raw meat separate from ready-to-eat foods. Wash hands, counters and utensils with hot soapy water after exposure to raw meat.
- Drink only pasteurized milk, juice or cider.
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly, especially those that will not be cooked.
- Always wash hands after using the toilet.

Dr. Hahn is recommending people not use packaged spinach or packaged mixed lettuce products that contain spinach until health officials obtain more information about the source of the *E. coli O157:H7*. She says an advisory to stores also is being distributed, asking them to pull packaged spinach and packaged salad mixes containing spinach until the source of the infection can be identified. The Department of Health & Welfare will issue specific brand names and lot numbers as soon as the information is available.

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(Editors: Interviews with Dr. Hahn are available by calling Ross Mason at (208) 334-0693)